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ABSTRACT

The comparative study was designed to determine whether cultural relativism and ethical reasoning develop in a hierarchical manner when applied to culturally different phenomena. The phenomena investigated were moral judgments concerning gender-related issues. Thirty-six first through sixth-grade students from two private schools and 130 university students were asked to respond to a scenario describing the Ancient Roman practice of educating boys and girls according to their sex role. The contents of the responses were analyzed and sorted into five categories: (1) pragmatic arguments only, (2) pragmatic arguments plus cultural perspective, (3) cultural perspective only, (4) cultural perspective combined with ethical arguments, and (5) ethical arguments only. A total of 78% of the present sample mentioned cultural variability as a criterion for judging the acceptability of institutionalized gender discrimination, suggesting that a large majority of adults regard sex roles as culturally arbitrary. Forty-four percent of category one (pragmatic arguments only) elementary-aged respondents appear to have used U.S. stereotypes for the purpose of giving meaning to the question. The findings appear to support the hierarchical relationship of gender, metacultural and moral schemata proposed by the hypothesis. The findings suggest gender schema theory could benefit from consideration of the whole context of social cognition. (SM)

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THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL RELATIVITY IN MORAL JUDGMENTS CONCERNING GENDER-RELATED ISSUES

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THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL RELATIVITY IN MORAL JUDGMENTS CONCERNING GENDER-RELATED ISSUES. D. R. Boyd, J. P. Gaa and Dov Liberman, Paper presented at AERA, San Francisco, April, 1986.

Bem (1985) has proposed that parents who wish to raise their children in such a way as to minimize sex-role stereotyping should provide them with what she terms a "cultural relativism" schema which contains the information that values and beliefs vary from family to family and from culture to culture, as well as a "sexism schema" which states that, while gender-assocaited phenomena are culturally variable, many are inherently unethical. However, none of the research conducted by Bem or others which examines hypotheses derived from gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) has investigated the possibility that a cognitive structure which incorporates the gender schema into a cultural relativity schema, and subsequently subjects phenomena known to vary culturally to universalized principles, may develop naturalistically as a consequence of a given individual's progression through cognitive, ego and moral development stages.

Researchers who approach issues of gender typing from a cognitive-structural perspective, howver, have examined questions relevant to sucha proposed course of development. Carter and Patterson (1982) comparatively investigated kindergarten through eighth-graders' conceptions of natural laws, rules of etiquette, and the prescriptive features of sex role stereotypes. Their findings led them to conclude that knowledge of sex role stereotypes becomes incorporated into a larger conceptual organization (social convention) during the concrete operational period. Additionally, Ullian (1976) has posited that, as an individual approaches Kohlberg's level of principled moral reasoning, acceptance of the social-conventional nature sex-role stereotypes comes into increasing conflict with beliefs in individuality and personal choice. The resolution of such conflicts results in more adaptive forms of thought concerning sex-role stereotypes.

Following from Carter and Patterson, sex-role stereotypes may become subsumed by awareness of the arbitrariness of social convention, and, following Ullian, social conventionality may come under the scrutiny of ethical prinples.

Method

Thirty-six first through sixth grade students from two private schools and one hundred thirty adults (graduate and undergraduate students at a large university) were asked to respond either verbally or in writing (depending on the age of the subject) to the following scenario:

> In ancient Rome, boys were sent to school to study languages, mathematics and other academic subjects, while girls remained at home with their mothers to learn cooking, sewing and other domestic arts. Do you think this practice was right or wrong? Why?

Subjects who were asked to respond in writing (fourth, fifth and sixth graders and adults) were requested to make their answers as in-depth as possible.

The content of subjects' responses was analyzed and sorted by two independent raters, one of whom was naive with respect to the purpose of the study and developmental theory in general, according to the following procedures. First, responses were divided into four groups which included (1) those which used a cultural perspective, i.e. consideration of the issue only as it relates to society, as the exclusive justification for affirming or condemning the practice, (2) those which combined the cultural perspective with other concerns, (3) those which included no consideration of culture whatsoever, and (4) those which were unclassifiable due to a lack of sufficient interpretable information. These unclassifiable responses were eliminated from further analysis. The raters further divided category two responses into (1) responses which combined the cultural perspective with pragmatic arguments, and (2) responses which combined the cultural perspective with ethical arguments. Category three was partitioned into two groups: (1) responses which contained pragmatic arguments only, and (2) responses which contained ethical arguments only.

The resulting five response categories were ordered one through five as follows: (1) pragmatic arguments only, (2) pragmatic arguments plus cultural perspective, (3) cultural perspective only, (4) cultural perspective combined with ethical arguments, and (5) ethical arguments only. The hierarchical sequence suggested by the ordering of response categories was adopted because categories three (cultural perspective only), four (cultural perspective with ethical arguments) and five (ethical arguments only) are suggestive of the authors' hypothesis that cultural relativism and ethical reasoning applied to culturally different phenomena develop in a sequential, hierarchical manner. Additionally, the ordering of the five categories is conceptually similar to Kohlberg's (1983) stages of moral reasoning which proceed from rightness or wrongness defined in terms of material consequences, through justification and condemnation based on group-defined values and/or laws, toward application of universalized ethical principles to questions of morality.

After each rater had assigned a category to each response, differing category assignments were resolved according to a two step process. First, each rater considered the categorizations of the other which diverged

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from his own and altered his category assignment in those cases where he felt the other rater's judgment to be more accurate. If these procedures did not result in agreement, the two raters presented their respective scoring rationales to one another concerning those categorizations which they felt they could not alter. All disputes were resolved either through one rater's acceptance of the other's position or the two raters' agreement upon a compromise category assignment. The percentages of adults' and children's responses associated with each category were then calculated. Differing response category frequencies of males and females were also calculated.

The raters' initial sorting of responses into the five categories resulted in agreement in seventy-seven out of one hundred thirty adult cases. This figure included sixty-five response categorizations and twelve responses judged by both raters to be unclassifiable. Thirty-four of the sixty-three disputed cases involved adjacent categories, the basis of the raters' disagreement being whether mention of some aspect of the problem (e.g. pragmatic features of traditional sex roles) constituted invoking that feature as an argument in favor of or against the practice. Each rater's examination of the other's classifications which differed from his own resulted in agreement concerning all but fourteen of the one hundred eighteen classifiable responses. Resolution of all disputed cases was obtained through the discussion process described above.

With respect to the children's responses, agreement was obtained concerning twenty-four classifable and three unclassifiable responses, a total of twenty-seven out of thirty six cases. Of the nine disputed responses, four involved adjacent categories. Agreement concerning all nine cases was achieved without recourse to discussion between raters.

Results

The percentages of adults' responses, in proportion to the number of classifiable cases, associated with each category were found to be: 9% category one (pragmatic concerns only), 13% category two (pragmatic concerns with cultural perspective), 45% category three (cultural perspective only, 20% category four (cultural perspective with ethical concerns), and 13% category five (ethical concerns only). The percentage of children's responses classified in each category were: 76% category one, 9% category two, and 15% category three. None of the children's responses were assigned to categories four or five. The ages associated with each group of children's responses were: category one range 6-5 to 11-6, mean = 8-8; category two range 7-4 to 12-0, mean = 9-10; category three range 8-10 to 13-0, mean = 10-6.

Sixty-eight (10 males, 58 females) of the one hundred eighteen adults who gave classifiable responses indicated their gender on the response form. The responses associated with this subset of the total sample were distributed according to gender as follows: category one, 6 females, 0 males; category two, 9 females, 0 males; category three, 24 females, 6 males; category four, 10 females, 2 males; category five, 9 females, two males. The gender of all thirty-six elementary school subjects who participated in the study was known, making possible investigation of gender differences within the total sample of children. Boys' and girls' response category frequencies were found to be: category one, 13 males, 12 females; category two, one male, two females; category three, two males, three females.

All responses in category one (pragmatic concerns only, 9% of adults, 76% of children), were based upon either immediate or adult-life practical consequences of this policy for Roman children, such as "I don't think this is a good idea because how would the girls learn to read and write?" or "It's not fair that the girls got to stay home and the boys didn't". Further, forty-four per cent of the children's responses in this category were judged to be framed in terms of traditional American sex role stereotypes. For example, several children thought the practice to be right because "men need to work when they grow up and women don't". Other subjects condemned the practice on stereotypic grounds such as "the woman wouldn't know how to write down recipes if she didn't go to school" or "she would get cheated at the market if she didn't know math". Half of the adult subjects' category one responses were based upon the notion that each gender must learn the skills associated with the role of the other in case of a wife's loss of her husband, or the husband's separation from or loss of his wife. One such subject, for example, responded, "If something happened to the husband who has all the education that is needed for a profession, and all the offsprings were girls, how could the wife maintain her status in life that she has obtained with the help of her husband?".

Respondents in the second category (pragmatic concerns plus cultural perspective, 13% of adults, 9% of children) cited cultural context as a consideration, but as less important than the practical need for an education. For example:

> At that particular place and time, this practice may have indeed been "right"... Men and women are physically different. Men tend to have more strength and stamina so they were the ones more suited to apply the academic skills since this often involved combat or sailing on ships for

weeks.

> I don't agree with this practice. Girls do need an education outside of home type things. Of course living during that time was quite different from today's society.

In the third response category (cultural perspective only, 45% of adults, 15% of children), subjects' justifications or condemnations of the practice were based solely upon its societal context. Many subjects indicated that rightness and wrongness were irrelevant, and that only through examination of circumstances contemporaneous with the policy could its appropriateness or inappropriateness be determined. One subject expressed this view as follows:

> On the surface it would seem the practice was wrong. However, I do not feel I am knowledgeable enough about ancient Roman history to make an accurate judgment. Depending on circumstances (economic, political, etc.), it could have been appropriate for the time.

Quite frequently, responses in this category contrasted features of ancient and contemporary cultures in order to explain why the practice was acceptable then and not acceptable now. Such responses were exemplified by the following:

> I don't think we as twentieth century Americans can say this was either a wrong practice or a right practice. This practice worked for them and allowed them to operate in their society. In our society this would definitely be an unfair practice, because we view this as being prejudiced or discriminatory toward someone because of sex.

Another subject responded:

> Its right or wrongness depends solely on the status quo of a society. It is the society which determines the activities of the genders. In fact right or wrong is really somewhat irrelevant. One has to consider the times in question and the requirements of life other activities of humans of those times as well as events of the past to that date. To me, it seems to be a convenient arrangement, all things considered.

Still other category three responses, such as the following, judged the practice to be wrong on the basis of its cost to society.

> By excluding girls, the Roman Empire did not utilize its entire population in its growth and development. It kept girls from becoming a contributing asset to the society. Any time a society chooses a set population to educate, they are losing, in the long run, for there will be great minds lost in the exclusion.

Clearly, the overiding theme present in the responses included in category three was that the morality of such a practice should be judged from the perspective of the society within which it occurs, rather than from an individual point of view.

The distinction observed between such responses and category four (cultural perspective plus ethical concerns, 20% of adults, 0% of children) answers was one of concern for individuality, in terms of choice rather than practicality as observed in category two, although cultural context was mentioned as an important consideration. The following category four responses illustrate this dichotomy:

> I believe this practice was the most practical one for their society. However, the most ideal situation for theirs and ours would be for all children to learn domestic arts and academic subjects at the basic level, with the freedom to choose which areas they would continue on to advanced study in. Society and individuals lose when individual's potential is curtailed by society's expectations which are based strictly on gender (or race or size or any other irrelevant factors).

> This was both right and wrong. It was wrong to discriminate against women by confining their education to domestic skills. It was right in the sense that they were being prepared for the position that they would hold in life. It makes no sense to train a person in skills which society will not permit the exercise of. I just changed my mind. Training in academic studies should have been available regardless of whether the individual might have need of the subject material. Conclusion: it was wrong.

In contrast, category five responses (ethical concerns only) focused on issues of individuality and freedom of

choice exclusively, generally eschewing societal concerns altogether.

> People who wish to study academic subjects should be allowed to do so, whether they are male or female. People should also be free to choose whether or not they wish to remain in the home and learn domestic arts. In any society, ancient or contemporary, there will be individuals who will be uncomfortable with the stereotypic status quo. Then as now there are males who prefer domestic arts to academics and females who prefer academics to domestic arts. I feel it was and is wrong to suppress an individual's desire to learn or become what he or she wishes.

> I believe this practice was wrong for the simple reason being that it restricts personal freedom. If the girls choose to stay at home that's fine, but if they prefer to go to school, they should be given that opportunity.

> The important issue is not which sex does what but that (1) each person has an opportunity to develop their own talents, (2) each have the opportunity to choose their own course in life, and finally, (3) that all people are subjected to as much information as possible in order to have a large repertoire to choose from.

> I feel that this practice was wrong because it dictated to the children what they could do. Girls and boys alike should have had a choice to do either or both of the activities.

Discussion

The lack of male responses in categories one and two is in all likelihood the result of the small number of males participating in the study rather than a lack of pragmatic, or gender schematic thinking among males in general.

The observation that forty-four per cent of category one elementary aged respondents appear to have used American stereotypes, exclusive of other criteria, for the purpose of giving meaning to the question posed is indicative of gender schematic processing, i.e. the question would appear to have been interpreted by these young subjects as dealing with the gender appropriateness of this practice rather than its efficacy or morality in a larger sense. In addition, the focus of half of the adult category one respondents upon the practical need for each gender to acquire the skills which are the domain of the other, but to use those skills only in

the absence or unavailability of the opposite sex, would also appear to result from gender schematic processing applied to this issue. These findings, together with the age frequencies associated with each category and the two apparently transitional categories which combined cultural context with other criteria, would appear to support the hierarchical relationship of gender, metacultural and moral schemata proposed by the present authors.

The present findings would also appear to confirm the hypothesis of Carter and Patterson (1983) that, as the individual develops, sex role stereotypes become incorporated into a social reasoning system which centers around knowledge of cultural variability and social convention. Additionally, Ullian's (1976) suggestion that phenomena judged in culturally relativistic terms must, at higher levels of development, come under the scrutiny of beliefs in universal ethical principles, resulting in the acceptance or rejection of conventions on the basis of their irrelevance to (e.g. which side of the street is to be driven upon), violation of or congruence with such values, would also appear to have been supported by the present investigation.

In the present study, a total of seventy-eight per cent of the present sample mentioned cultural variability, either alone or in combination with other concerns, as a criterion for judging the acceptability of institutionalized gender discrimination, suggesting that a large majority of adults regard sex roles as culturally arbitrary . Why, then, contrary to Bem's suggestion that providing children with a cultural relativism schema should mediate gender schematic processing both in childhood and later in life, does the degree to which an individual is sex typed, as measured by current instrumentation (e.g. Bem, 1974; Spence, Helmreich and Stapp, 1974) continue to be an important predictor of his/her tendency to organize stimuli and behavior along gender differentiated dimensions?. If knowledge of the arbitrariness of culturally defined sex roles were capable of mediating gender schematic processing, the magnitude of present findings would suggest that such empirical outcomes should be difficult, if not impossible, to find. An obvious proposal derived from the cognitive-structural framework would be that the evolution of this level of socio-moral knowledge is necessary but insufficient to the development of the ability to mediate gender schematic processing. In Piagetian terms, it may be possible to learn about cultural relativity without accommodating the gender schema sufficiently to alter the manner in which environmental, social and intrapersonal events are assimilated to it. Studies which examine the relationship between an individual's position relative to the developmental scale herein proposed and his/her degree of self-typing as well as

stimuli-typing are needed to test both the necessity and sufficiency of the presumed cultural relativism schema to the development of non-gender-schematic processing.

Additionally, Bem's (1985) contention that a "sexism schema" would constitute an ethical organization capable of mediating gender schematic processing is also called into question by the present investigation. Subjects in all five categories often condemned sexist practices in general. However, in each instance, an individual's concept of sexism would appear to have been assimilated to the subject's more general structuring of the issue under consideration, that is, sexism was something which was reasoned about rather than a premise for reasoning itself. For example, a category one adult respondent condemned sexism because "it caused men to have to get married just to have a maid". Only in category five responses (ethical concerns only) was sexism argued to represent a violation of obligatory, ahistorical, impersonal, unalterable, generalizable and significant principles, a condition which Kohlberg (1983) has argued is essential to the definition of an ethical principle and to the assumption that an individual's interpretation of an issue is moral in nature. Thus, our results suggest that the belief that sexism is wrong, in and of itself, does not constitute an ethical principle, as Bem (1985) would suggest. Rather, it is the premise upon which the belief is based which determines its ethicality or non-ethicality.

Another issue to be considered in future research is the degree to which contemporary adult males and females regard their roles as resulting from societal demands rather than from personal choice. A general aim of the feminist movement was to remove role restrictions should in order to allow for greater latitude in personal decision making. If, however, a majority of men and women see the differences between their lives and their parents' presumably more stereotypic experiences as a function of cultural context rather than individual expression, then a generalization concerning the more individualistic orientation of today's adults as compared to previous generations cannot be inferred from empirically observed behavioral shifts (e.g. more women plumbers, more househusbands, etc.). Indeed, the developmental theories of both Loevinger (1976) and Kohlberg (1983) would predict precisely the phenomenon suggested by category three responses such as the following:

> At the time in history this occurs, it was an accepted and practical practice. I believe that in today's society, this is not possible with the economic and social climate we are forced to deal with. Having families where both parents must work today makes it necessary to change men's and women's

> roles in school and home. In ancient Rome, women were not needed for economic reasons to go to school and learn about politics.

In other words, this subject, as might be predicted from Kohlberg's conventional level of morality and Loevinger's conformist level of ego development, brings to bear upon the explanation of ancient versus contemporary gender roles a value system which is premised upon the supremacy of social structure over individual needs and choices.

In summary, the present findings suggest that, while notions of gender schematic processing have been empirically useful in identifying tendencies in the organization of perceptions and behaviors, gender schema theory could benefit from consideration of the whole context of social cognition. A reframing of the theory from the perspective of an equilibrative model of development such as that which Furth (1980) has adapted from Piaget (1975) to explain the development of children's understanding of social roles in general would appear to be in order. Such a model would focus upon the modifications of children's gender schemata which are facilitated by cognitive, personality, social and moral development.

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